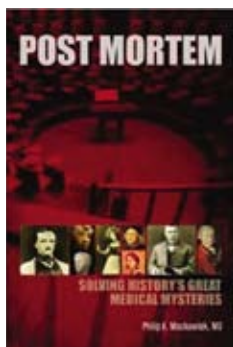


Book Reviews

Post Mortem - Solving History's Great Medical Mysteries. Philip A. Mackowiak. American College of Physicians, Philadelphia, June 2007. Hardback, 350pp. £19.95. ISBN 978-1-93051-389-1.



We are fascinated by other people's problems; we are fascinated by celebrity - and when celebrities have problems, the effect is synergistic, rather than additive. This is not merely the province of tabloids and day-time television - serious scholars crave their fix of morbid gossip too. Historical diagnosis has a long and juicy history, and in "Post Mortem", Mackowiak revisits some of the most controversial diagnostic conundra from ancient times to the more recent past. In many cases we have only documentary accounts or artistic representations, and the reports of the times may be coloured by hearsay, political spin or mistaken superstition. Be that as it may, we like to feel in touch with our forebears, and maybe there is no better way to do it than to pick over their symptoms, real or imagined. This volume arises from a selection of cases from a series of historical Clinicopathological Conferences (CPCs; analogous to the Grand Rounds or clinical meetings that we in the UK know and love) held by the author in Baltimore, where he is a distinguished professor of Medicine.

The first case on Mackowiak's cold analytic slab is Egypt's heretic sun king Akhenaten, who ruled in the glorious heyday of the New Kingdom in the 14th century BCE. Abandoning the ways of his forefathers, Akhenaten launched a radical programme in which he overturned the cults of the traditional Egyptian gods, and promoted the monotheistic worship of his one true god, represented by the solar disc, the Aten. Even the traditional representational art of Egypt was re-defined, and his depictions show him with elongated limbs, a pot belly, a serpentine neck, and other features previously unseen - and unthinkable - in the normally austere and idealised Egyptian artistic canon.

There has been a lively debate over whether these were depictions of Akhenaten in his true likeness, or an affected artistic style encapsulating new Atenist ideas of other-worldly royal divinity. Taking the former approach, many scholars have proposed diagnoses that might account for this etiolated phenotype. By far the most plausible proposition in my opinion is the connective tissue disorder Marfan syndrome, although Mackowiak ditches this on relatively flimsy grounds in favour of Klinefelter syndrome. Akhenaten and his wife, the legendary beauty Nefertiti, had at least six children who were represented in a similar style to Akhenaten himself, which would seem to exclude Klinefelter at a stroke, as Klinefelter syndrome causes infertility (and it is not even a particularly good match for the phenotype). Mackowiak largely glosses over this important objection, and sticks with what I feel is the wrong conclusion. However, whatever hypotheses we construct, without DNA confirmation we are not going to be able to resolve the issue. Akhenaten's mummy

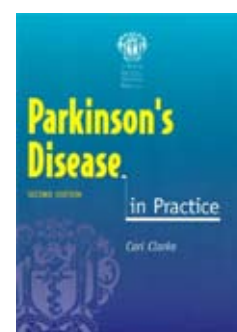
has never been firmly identified, so this may remain an open question, although recent work in Egypt suggests that the genetics of the New Kingdom rulers (including Akhenaten's probable son, Tutankhamun) might be a soluble problem after all. Watch this space.

Other cases from antiquity range from Herod the Great, whose gangrenous penis and worm-ridden demise were recounted with evident relish by the Jewish historian Josephus, to the emperor Claudius of Rome, who was plagued by movement and personality difficulties. We then advance a millennium or so, and run across Joan of Arc, Christopher Columbus and Florence Nightingale, among others. The cases are presented in a modified clinical format that is immediately familiar, although such terminology as "the patient" (when referring to the case in question) feels a little contrived when we are discussing such matters from the dim and distant past. Each chapter ends with a very welcome set of references, which will undoubtedly prompt many readers to delve a little deeper.

This volume lends itself well to dipping, as each chapter is pretty much self-contained. It is a pleasant read, and stimulates and informs in equal measure. It is unfortunately let down a little by several typographical errors that seem to have crept in at the editorial stage. I am left thinking that "Differential Diagnosis" might have been a more appropriate title (with the format re-structured accordingly), and that a rather more argumentative discourse might have appealed more to a medical audience - generally a cantankerous bunch. Nevertheless, we get a strong feeling of "what might have been", had things turned out differently for our patients, or had their ailments been diagnosed correctly at the time. Perhaps it is indeed best that we have them at the remove of several centuries - for one thing, it makes the relatives less likely to sue.

Shane McKee

Parkinson's Disease in Practice (2nd edition). Carl Clarke. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London, December 2006. Paperback, 100pp. £18.95. ISBN 978-1-85315-745-5.



The first edition of this small book won a first prize in the British Medical Association's Medical Book Competition in 2002 and was favourably received by reviewers. The management of Parkinson's Disease has seen recent changes, including last year's NICE guidelines, warranting a second edition. In his preface, the author notes that the previous edition of his book was popular with "general practitioners, Parkinson's Disease Nurse Specialists, allied health professionals, pharmacists and even patients." This is a medical textbook which can be read by people with quite different levels of background knowledge, which is a testament to the author's comprehensible writing style. The chapters on epidemiology, aetiology and pathophysiology are brief and accessible, but feel comprehensive. The level

of detail is certainly adequate for the intended audience of non-specialists.

The book describes recent advances in diagnostic radiology which are improving discrimination in difficult cases and advancing understanding of the disease. Each of the different groups of medical therapies is appointed a chapter. What seemed (to this medical SHO) a mildly bewildering array of pharmaceuticals for the treatment of this disease is reduced to four groups with clear indications and remarkably uncomplicated pharmacology. In the spirit of Evidence Based Medicine, the author often provides brief descriptions and analyses of trials and illustrates these with graphs and confidence intervals. The reader is therefore acquainted with some of the controversies and background knowledge to confidently interpret the new NICE guidelines for the diagnosis and management of Parkinson's Disease. The final chapter concerns these new guidelines, and this book is harmonious with the recommendations. Parkinson's Disease in Practice is an accessible, authoritative introduction to the current knowledge in this debilitating illness which should be of interest to any doctor working on medical wards.

Declan Bradley

Clinical Hypertension in Practice (2nd edition). Sern Lim. Royal Society of Medicine Press, London, September 2006. Paperback, 114pp. £18.95. ISBN 978-1-85315-659-5.

The invisible health hazard of hypertension is the focus of this short volume. It aims to be accessible to GPs, hospital doctors, students and nurses and is intended to be a summary of the current best practice, evidence and guidelines. The opening chapters describing the current understanding of the mechanisms of hypertension provide a background necessary to understanding the basis for treating hypertension. Where the book shines, though, is in the subject of clinical assessment. There is practical guidance for initial and further investigations, with comprehensive information about the interpretation of results and steering towards certain differential diagnoses. This, above all, makes this book a valuable resource for anyone treating hypertension.

With recent changes to the NICE guidelines for the treatment of Hypertension and so many trials of the newer pharmaceutical therapies, the long treatment chapter might warrant division into separate chapters for each class of drug in a future edition. Amidst the many drug trials, the lifestyle changes which lower blood pressure are not lost. The reader can confidently inform patients of the benefit of these non-pharmacological interventions.

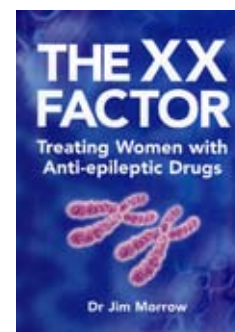
The author offers further guidance in treating hypertension in the elderly, in those taking other medications and in pregnancy as well as giving clear guidance for the treatment of hypertensive emergencies. Clinical Hypertension in Practice



provides a welcome refresher and update. Of its intended audience, junior medical staff and General Practitioners might find it most useful.

Declan Bradley

The XX Factor. Treating Women with Anti-epileptic Drugs. Jim Morrow. National Services for Health Improvement, Dartford, Kent, 2007. 80pp. £5.99. ISBN 978-0-9554803-2-4



There is increasing awareness and knowledge as to the risks of anti-epileptic drugs, particularly when used in pregnancy. Yet managing the care of women with epilepsy is even more complicated and difficult. Retrospective pregnancy registers are providing more reliable information regarding teratogenicity but it takes time to acquire information for many of the newer anti-epileptic drugs. Retrospective and small prospective studies continue to raise concerns regarding developmental outcome. Sodium valproate is of particular concern in both regards, but it remains one of the most effective treatments for specific epilepsies. Finally, increasing numbers of women are treated with anti-epileptic drugs for conditions other than epilepsy such as bipolar effective disorders, migraine, and chronic pain.

This small book with its eye-catching title attempts to address the evidence that is currently available in a no-nonsense, easy-to-read format. Although it recognises the lack of information for women taking anti-epileptic drugs for medical conditions other than epilepsy, the focus is on women with epilepsy. The book is divided into 10 chapters. The first 2 cover general issues of diagnosis and of the anti-epileptic drugs themselves. The remaining chapters are women specific, covering adolescence, fertility and sexuality, contraception, pregnancy, motherhood, and the menopause. The format is clear and easy to read with useful key points at the end of each chapter.

A wide range of health professionals should find this book helpful, including General Practitioners, Neurologists who see patients with epilepsy but would not consider themselves Epileptologists, Specialist Epilepsy Nurses, Practice Nurses, and Midwives. Psychiatrists and those who work in headache and pain clinics should also read this book if only to alert themselves to the uncertain risks they are exposing their patients to when prescribing anti-epileptic drugs.

This book does not of course provide all the answers but it does comprehensively go through the issues and meets its promise to present the evidence currently available. For those who need more detail, it directs the reader to a comprehensive list of over ninety references. This is a helpful book for those who need a quick update on this important area.

Aline Russell (Glasgow)